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WAS HAMLET MAD?

A LEGAL AND METAPHYSICAL STUDY

BY

NEWMAN WATTS

OF LINCOLN'S INN, BARRISTER-AT-LAW

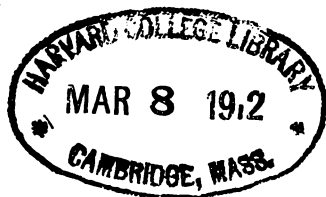
AUTHOR OF "THE LAW OF PROMOTERS OF PUBLIC COMPANIES" AND
"FLORIDA: ITS CLIMATE, SOIL, AND RESOURCES"

LONDON

KEGAN PAUL, TRENCH & CO., 1, PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1888

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F. E. Shaw,
Roxton

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WAS HAMLET MAD?

BEFORE entering upon the consideration of the subject proper of this article, we wish it to be understood that we, in common with most Englishmen, entertain a profound respect for the genius of Shakespeare. This sentiment, however, we contend, does not preclude a fair criticism of any of the characters portrayed by the poet. The present inquiry we propose to conduct from a purely legal and evidentiary point of view. In propounding the theory advanced in the title which heads this article, and in substantiating and developing the various stages incidental to the prosecution of the inquiry, we propose to avail ourselves exclusively of, and solely accept, the intrinsic evidence disclosed by, and comprised within the limits of, the play itself.

The play of Hamlet has hitherto been accepted on the lines that Hamlet simulated madness only, remaining of course a sane man ; that the killing of his uncle was justifiable, and an act of retribution. Our present object is to show that neither view is warranted by the circumstances of the case and the evidence available.

In order to economise both time and space we will at once arraign Hamlet on three charges, or allegations, viz.—

- (1) That Hamlet was a culpable regicide.
- (2) That he was guilty of the murder of Polonius.
- (3) As an alternative to the first charge, that if by reason of precipitation of events he did not become a regicide in a culpable sense, that his intention was to be such.

From the nature of the case we must arrogate to ourselves the offices of both judge and jury. As arising out of the foregoing allegations we have to try three issues, viz.—

- (1) Was Hamlet culpably guilty of regicide?
- (2) Of the murder of Polonius? and—
- (3) As a defence to the two preceding, Was Hamlet mad?

Our allegation of Hamlet's insanity is based upon the following reasons, viz.—

(1) The insufficiency of the grounds for his avowed intention to kill his uncle.

(2) His eccentric behaviour, not viewed *per se*, but as evidencing mental aberration when super-added to the points hereunder, viz.—

(a) His morbid temperament.

(b) His insanity viewed in relation to his deficiency in the moral sense.

(c) His irrational treatment of Ophelia.

(d) His defective memory and illogical condition of mind, evidenced by his treating the combined secret of his life, and the motive for his revenge, as a confidence reposed.

(e) His irresolution and doubt as to reality of evidence he declared cogent incentives to revenge.

(3) The opinion of his contemporaries as to his sanity.

Before trying the first issue, viz. Was Hamlet a culpable regicide? we cannot avoid, to some extent, anticipating a future point; because the

same comprises matter common alike to such first issue and the third issue, viz. Was Hamlet mad? Therefore it is convenient that we should, in concise terms, review the indisputable facts of the case, as bearing upon the absence of motive in Hamlet for the formulation of an intention to kill the king.

Claudius, King of Denmark, is presented to us as at least a *de facto* ruler of the kingdom. His succession to that kingdom was acquiesced in by his subjects. As to whether Claudius was a *de jure* successor to the throne of his brother and predecessor, Hamlet, we are not concerned to inquire. We stated at the outset that our treatment of this subject would be legal, evidentiary, and confined to matters patent on the face of, or comprised within the limits of, the play. Consequently it is immaterial to our argument what were or were not the laws relating to succession to the throne of Denmark. The declaration of the cause of the late king's death was accepted by the new king's subjects. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is now seen occupying at his uncle's court the position of a courtier.

He is very properly represented to us as grieving deeply and sincerely at the loss of an honoured father. Cause for irritation Hamlet undoubtedly had in the contemplation of an indecently speedy marriage between his uncle and the mother who had so short a time before displayed such apparent devotion to his late kingly father. Whether this marriage was illegal and incestuous according to the laws of Denmark we know not ; apparently no sign of disapproval on the part of his subjects at his union is elicited. We must regard such marriage, then, as being personally obnoxious to Hamlet as a breach of propriety, and an outrage on the domestic fitness of things. Be it observed, however, that up to a certain point Hamlet himself accepted his uncle's account of the death of the latter's brother and the former's father. That the death of his father was a great shock to Hamlet there can be no doubt ; that his emotion was deep and long-continued is equally certain. That this display of emotion was very obnoxious to the king is evident.

Now, we have this factitious advantage in pursuing the present inquiry, that we can see

the end from the beginning. We know his uncle admitted the murder of Hamlet's father. But is there any single statement made, inference deducible, or any reliable evidence that Hamlet knew of the real circumstance attending his said father's death? We are of course aware that we are asked by the poet to believe that Hamlet was favoured with a ghostly revelation from his father, incriminating his brother, the reigning sovereign, as his murderer and a regicide! Can we, consistently with our avowed intention of regarding this subject from a legal and evidentiary point of view, admit as evidence the intangible, uncorroborated personal statement of Hamlet, that his ghostly father alleged so serious a crime against his brother and successor? In the absence of proof and reliable *data* as to the possibility of appearance of spectral, yet recognizable, personalities, and their value when proved, we are compelled to ignore, and declare inadmissible, evidence so psychological and supernatural in its nature as that of Hamlet's deceased father. The propriety of this rejection of ghostly evidence we respectfully leave to the higher appellate tribunal of public opinion.

The investigation of the first issue will now occupy our attention, viz. was Hamlet guilty of culpable regicide? We have shown, in our opening review, the circumstances existing at the period of the inception of the play. We hereinbefore declared the inadmissibility of the evidence of Hamlet's ghostly father. A limited use, however, of the ghost scene is permissible; and this is to regard the dialogue therein as revealing and initiating Hamlet's intention to compass the death of his uncle. This intent is shown in the few words we now quote from the ghost scene in scene 5 of Act i., viz.—

“Haste me to know't; that I, with wings as swift
As meditation, or the thoughts of love,
May sweep to my revenge.”

So much for the intent. The object of the intent is made clear in the ensuing quotation:—

“*Ghost*: The serpent that did sting thy father's life,
Now wears his crown.

Hamlet: O my prophetic soul! my uncle!”

The next stage in the prosecution of this scheme of motiveless revenge is discerned in the deep-laid plan of engaging the players to act a part which in Hamlet's delusion he avers shall be, in effect, a re-enactment of the incidents attending the con-

summation of the alleged crime of that fatal day. As we all know, Hamlet designed to convict his uncle, and judge of his guilt or innocence of the crime in question, by the presence or absence only of facial expression or emotion as indicative of a guilty conscience. To Hamlet's revengeful eye and distempered judgment, the effect of his ruse is conclusive of his uncle's guilt, and his criminal intention receives a fresh stimulus by being strengthened and confirmed. Later on we find that on Polonius leaving the king's presence after an interview, the latter audibly, but unheard by Polonius, makes confession of his guilt in murdering his royal brother. Hamlet enters, unseen by the king, and discovers him kneeling in prayer, but hears nothing of his confession, the same being concluded. Hamlet debates within himself as to whether he shall seize the opportunity presented to slay his uncle whilst defenceless and in his power. His first impulse is to consummate his revenge, shown in the words, "And now I'll do't . . . and so am I revenged."

Hamlet, however, stands irresolute ; he evidently thinks that poetic justice would not be meted out to

his uncle by slaying him whilst in prayerful preparation for, and expectation of, absolution from his supposed crime. The incidents of the opportunity do not suit his mood, and with the reflection, "This physic but prolongs thy sickly days," Hamlet withdraws, and the king's life is, for the time being, spared.

Prior and posterior to this scene it is very evident that the king regarded Hamlet's sullen demeanour with the greatest uneasiness and apprehension. In fact, his presence was regarded as a menace to the life and throne of his relative, and he revolves in his mind a decent pretext for banishing Hamlet from his dominions.

The death of Polonius, and the recognized policy of hushing up the matter, serves as a fitting excuse and occasion for sending Hamlet to England. Accordingly, Hamlet is despatched to England, bearing, in common with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the king's sealed orders and mandate, the latter having for its object the putting to death of Hamlet.

Hamlet, however, discovers the plot against his life, and by a device avoids the consequence of the

king's said mandate, and returns to Denmark. In the interval, however, between Hamlet's departure for England and his return therefrom, Laertes seeks out the king, demanding satisfaction at his hands for the death of his father, Polonius. The king denies his implication in, and clears himself of, his chamberlain's death, informing Laertes that Hamlet was the slayer of his father. Laertes, burning to revenge his father's death, readily lends himself to, and becomes the chief actor in, a treacherous scheme by which Laertes is to challenge Hamlet to a duel, the sword used wherein by Laertes is to be dipped in a deadly potion, the slightest wound from which would ensure Hamlet's speedy death. The king, in order to render "assurance doubly sure," provides a poisoned cup, to be offered to Hamlet to quench the natural thirst engendered by the heat of combat. The duel proceeds, with the result that Laertes wounds Hamlet, whilst by the accidental exchange of rapiers, Laertes is in turn wounded by Hamlet. The queen, ignorant of its character, insists upon drinking from the poisoned cup and dies, but not before declaring the cause of her death. Hamlet, exclaiming that

there is treachery, demands that it be sought out, but is informed by Laertes that he (Hamlet) is himself the victim of the poisoned rapier. Laertes succumbs to his wound from the same instrument, but before his death indicates the king as the cause alike of Hamlet's and the queen's death. Hamlet, concentrating his remaining energies, stabs the king with the envenomed rapier, by this act becoming, owing to unexpected disclosures and variation of circumstances, the avenger of his father's murder, his mother's and his own death.

Our investigation into the first allegation results in a verdict that, in the event, Hamlet was not guilty of culpable regicide; but in respect of the third, we cannot avoid the conclusion that, though fresh circumstances transpired involving new and justifying motives, yet Hamlet's intention, which never altered, was to be a regicide. The consummation of this crime he narrowly escaped on the occasion we hereinbefore described.

Yes!

It now becomes our duty to deal with the second allegation, and to try the issue arising there-out, viz. Was Hamlet guilty of the murder of Polonius? This issue is less complex. Hamlet

himself bore no discoverable malice against Polonius, and suggests no motive for his crime. We of course recognize the, in a measure, accidental circumstance attending the death of Polonius. But this does not absolve Hamlet from the charge of murder. He admits his intention was to kill the king. Therefore the slaying of Polonius, with the superadded element of malice imported by the intention to kill the king, constituted Hamlet answerable for the murder of Polonius. The resulting verdict is one of guilty on this allegation, subject to, and dependent upon, the result of the trial of, and decision arrived at, in respect of the third issue, viz. Was Hamlet mad?

This is a logical sequence, because, we contend, his original unlawful intent to compass the king's death remained to the end, though precipitation of events, fresh motives, and the supervening of new and adequate grounds of provocation caused his said original intention, based as it was on insufficient grounds and utter absence of motive, to be effectuated and consummated by an act lawful, commendable, and retributive in its nature. Before prosecuting our inquiry in respect of the third issue, viz. Was

Hamlet mad? we would premise our remarks thereunder by stating that our verdict of not guilty in respect of the first allegation against Hamlet, of being a culpable regicide, does not obviate the necessity of an investigation into his sanity. It is, then, the criminality and the inadequacy, or rather, let us say, the absence of motive producing intention, that puts us on inquiry as to his sanity.

In advancing the allegation of Hamlet's madness, we would carefully guard against a charge of superficiality in our selection of a basis for such allegation; therefore we will at once declare we do not rely upon Hamlet's statement of his intention to comport himself in manner adverted to in the well-known lines—

“How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself,
As I, perchance, hereafter shall think meet.
To put an antic disposition on,” etc.

We deprecate emphatically any intention to be reckless slanderers of a central figure in one of the poet's best plays. Our conviction is that in adopting the view here set forth, we do but excuse, account for, and throw the mantle of charity over, the otherwise inexcusable and

unaccountable crimes of Hamlet. Further, we are not going to attempt to deny to Hamlet the possession of natural gifts of a high order. If it be retorted upon us, Is there not so much method discernible in Hamlet's madness, and so great shrewdness exhibited by him, as to disprove the allegation? we reply, By no means; because the concurrence of insanity with perfect lucidity on many points is compatible, when the phase of insanity exhibited is that of monomania only. We assert that Hamlet, originally sane, but naturally of a morbid temperament, becomes insane, owing to fortuitous circumstances and the presence of exciting causes. These exciting causes undoubtedly were: excessive grief at his father's death, prolonged irritation at his uncle's marriage with his mother, and his failure to secure Ophelia for his bride. We proceed to arrange, under appropriate headings, the evidence which we have collated in proof of the allegation now under notice.

(1) As to the insufficiency of the grounds for his avowed intention to kill his uncle.

We have already shown that Hamlet had no reliable information of the real cause of his father's

death—certainly none which any sane man could feel justified in acting upon.

A short investigation of the ghost scene is here permissible in this metaphysical inquiry, as tending to show that, even if ghostly revelations were receivable as evidence, the revelation was admittedly personal to Hamlet, therefore the alleged subject-matter of such revelation stands on his unsupported and uncorroborated statement, whilst the apparition is seen by Hamlet in common with other witnesses. Nor is the position strengthened by Hamlet's attempt to fortify his already slender grounds for malice towards the king by purporting to impart to his friends, Horatio and Marcellus, the secret contained in the ghostly revelation. In what terms, we ask, was this secret conveyed to his auditors ?

“ *Hamlet* : How say you then ; would heart of man once think it ? . . .

There's ne'er a villain dwelling in all Denmark,
But he's an arrant knave.”

Can any communication be imagined more ambiguous and vague in its terms. There is certainly no context from which we can reasonably or logically infer that the king was the “knave” referred to. Horatio and Marcellus are distinctly absolved

by the terms of this secret from a possible charge of being accessories before the fact of Hamlet's intention to kill the king. We shall have occasion to refer again to this point.

Next take Hamlet on his own showing in reference to what passed between his ghostly father and himself in scene 5—

Ghost : Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

Hamlet : Murder? . . .

Ghost : . . . Know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life,
Now wears his crown.

Hamlet : O my prophetic soul ! my uncle !"

This passage forcibly illustrates the state of mind of Hamlet. Here is proof abundant of the illogical, irrational condition of a man who, having formed a conviction of the guilt of another on so flimsy a basis, now plumes himself on his prescience, and eagerly recognizes as confirmation of his unwarrantable prophecy the revelation of a supernatural visitant.

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(2) His eccentric behaviour, not viewed *per se*, but as evidencing mental aberration when super-added to the following points :—

✓ (a) As to his morbid temperament. The sight of his mother married with such unseemly haste

to his uncle, powerfully affects Hamlet; so much so that he expresses himself tired of his life, and even dallies with the idea of suicide. We next find him condemning himself to silence at the cost of a broken heart. But our view is, that to one of Hamlet's sensitive and morbid temperament, his mind was far more likely to become unhinged and distempered than his heart to break. Our suggestion is that prolonged simulation of madness merged, in Hamlet's case, by the action of mind-

disintegrating effects of unnatural silence and introspection, into the reality of the part simulated.

(b) His insanity viewed in his deficiency in the moral sense. Can we regard as sane a man who is so careless in taking, and so callous after taking, a human life, as was Hamlet in killing Polonius? On discovering that he had destroyed the life of a man who had not, so far as we can judge, crossed his path, how flippantly he treats the dreadful tragedy:—

“Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
 . . . Take thy fortune:
 Thou find'st, to be too busy is some danger.”

Here we have just such an outburst of homicidal mania as might have been anticipated—

reckless and unreasoning in its selection of a victim, devoid of motive.

(c) His abrogation of human sympathies and natural anticipations of happiness. That Hamlet loved Ophelia devotedly we have no room to doubt; that he set himself to win her affections is clear. Having won them, he affects to, and does by his language, despise the possession of them, treating Ophelia in a most heartless and opprobrious manner, to be explained only, we contend, on the hypothesis of insanity. Surely it was not incumbent on Hamlet, if really sane, and even in pursuance of a simulated character, to address Ophelia at all, if, as we cannot doubt, he had devoted himself to the one absorbing principle of his being, viz. the motiveless design upon his uncle's life. We have before drawn attention to Hamlet's dalliance with the idea of suicide. In Act iii. scene I we again find him reverting to the subject, and this time we gather from the following lines that his love-affair is the exciting cause:—

“For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, . . .
The pangs of despised love, . . .
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?”

We think we have said enough on this head to prove, *pro tanto*, our contention for the existence in Hamlet's mind of strange delusions. Hamlet was indeed a perverter of feminine ways when he designates Ophelia's treatment of his addresses as "despised love."

(d) His defective memory, and illogical condition of mind, evidenced by his treating the combined secret of his life and the motive for his revenge as a confidence reposed. This is exemplified in the passage in Act iii. scene 2, where Hamlet discusses with Horatio his ruse for discovering by the involuntary disclosure on the part of the king of a guilty conscience when witnessing the acting of a scene which Hamlet avers was a reproduction of that enacted on the fatal day of his father's alleged murder. Hamlet here reminds Horatio, very illogically, of the approximation of such scene to "the circumstance which I have told thee of my father's death." This confidence, as a matter of fact, was never reposed, so far as we can discover.

(e) His irresolution and doubt as to reality of evidence he declared cogent incentives to revenge.

Witness in scene 4 of Act i. his failure to recognize, with any degree of certainty, his ghostly father :—

“Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn'd, . . .
 Thou comest in such questionable shape,
 That I will speak to thee ; I'll call thee, Hamlet,
 King, father, royal Dane.”

And again, at an advanced period, in the closing lines of scene 2 of Act ii. he shows the same failure to positively recognize his father in the apparition :—

“ . . . The spirit that I have seen
 May be the devil : and the devil hath power
 To assume a pleasing shape ; yea, and, perhaps,
 Out of my weakness, and my melancholy,
 (As he is very potent with such spirits),
 Abuses me to damn me.”

(3) Lastly, we have shortly to consider the opinion of Hamlet's contemporaries as to his sanity.

And here it behoves us to discriminate between interested and *bona fide* opinions. Firstly, then, we discard that of his mother, as proceeding from a *particeps criminis*. Still we agree with her that one cause of Hamlet's state was “his father's death and our o'erhasty marriage.” Secondly, his uncle of

course was vitally interested to make out his case to be one of dangerous lunacy; so his testimony is not a credible one, and is rejected. Thirdly, Polonius, we think, honestly believed that, disappointed in securing his daughter, Ophelia, for his bride, Hamlet fell into a melancholy in consequence, which in turn developed into actual insanity. Fourthly, the evidence of Ophelia is very important on this head, because she undoubtedly loved him for himself, and in addition admired his gifts of intellect and personable qualities. Under these circumstances we accept the evidence of Ophelia, who naturally would be a partial critic, but found it impossible, in view of his irrational conduct, to resist the conclusion that he was insane. See in the lines here quoted the inevitable conclusion to which Ophelia was prompted by her common sense:—

“O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown! . . .
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh:
That unmatch’d form and feature of blown youth,
Blasted with ecstasy.”

In conclusion, we submit that, in view of the evidence hereinbefore adduced, we cannot avoid a

verdict of "not guilty" of the murder of Polonius, on the ground of insanity ; and had Hamlet been an Englishman, and survived to take his trial, the sentence upon him would have been "to be detained during Her Majesty's pleasure."

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